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### ICU outcomes in acute respiratory failure secondary to COPD

The data presented by Breen *et al*<sup>1</sup> regarding the outcomes of patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are encouraging and lend support to the respiratory physician often faced with nihilistic attitudes towards ventilating these patients in acute respiratory failure. However, despite the proposition by the authors that certain patients with likely poor outcomes might have been excluded, the ICU stays for both groups (intubated and non-intubated) are strikingly short.

This suggests that the threshold for intubation as opposed to non-invasive ventilation (NIV) may have been lower before 1994 than in current practice. Although the authors explain the reason for the high levels of Pao<sub>2</sub> on admission to the ICU, it could be that the severity of respiratory acidosis may have reflected excess oxygen therapy rather than the severity of the underlying mechanical respiratory failure, thus being more readily reversible and requiring a shorter period of ventilatory support. Although the decision to intubate is not solely based upon blood gases, with the increasing availability of NIV it might be that a subgroup of these patients would now be managed using controlled oxygen therapy, respiratory stimulants, and NIV.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, I suspect that the physiological state of the patient that we offer to the ICU in our current practice may be worse than in this study with commensurate outcomes (longer stays and higher mortality). Despite this, many patients still do well and studies of this type need to continue to assess predictors of unfavourable end points.

**L Howard**

Department of Respiratory Medicine, Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital, Norwich NR4 7UY, UK; luke.howard@tinyworld.co.uk

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### Marginal benefits of adding formoterol

Price and colleagues<sup>1</sup> conclude that adding formoterol confers a therapeutic advantage to inhaled steroid in patients with mild to moderate asthma. During the 6 month follow up, in part II of the study the frequency of the secondary outcome of mild asthma exacerbations differed by 2.5 per patient per 6 months while the difference in poorly controlled asthma days was 4.2 days per patient per 6 months. These differences, while statistically significant, are unlikely to be of real clinical relevance. Indeed, during the same period the difference in quality of life was neither significant nor clinically relevant. The main differences which were significant were in bronchodilator sensitive outcomes such as peak flow and reliever use, which are to be expected when patients are taking a 24/7 bronchodilator. These data are little different from those in steroid naive patients in the OPTIMA trial over 12 months where the addition of formoterol to low dose budesonide improved lung function but not exacerbations, while in the same trial the addition of formoterol conferred only a small but significant reduction in exacerbations in patients previously treated with corticosteroids.<sup>2</sup>

Pointedly, neither of these studies evaluated any inflammatory surrogates. We would therefore suggest that these trials indicate that most patients with mild to moderate asthma can be adequately controlled on low to medium doses of inhaled budesonide alone, and that there is only a marginal advantage conferred by adding formoterol. Moreover, combination inhalers are considerably more expensive than inhaled steroid alone and their routine use is not warranted in primary care.

**B J Lipworth, C M Jackson**

Asthma and Allergy Research Group, Ninewells University Hospital, Dundee, UK Correspondence to: Professor B J Lipworth, Asthma and Allergy Research Group, Ninewells University Hospital, Dundee DD1 9SY, UK; topdoc@brianlipworth.com

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Respiratory Medicine Specialist Handbook

P Dilworth, D R Baldwin. UK: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001. £39.50. ISBN 90 5823 077 5

This is the first in a new series of specialist handbooks that aims to fill the niche between the comprehensive textbook and the pocket handbook. There are the obvious pitfalls of

trying to squeeze in too much detail at the expense of accessibility or reducing the subject to little more than a series of disjointed notes. However, this book—for the most part—steers clear of both of these errors and has produced a very readable, yet reasonably detailed, summary of specialist respiratory medicine. The 31 chapters cover a wide variety of topics and the authors' list is like a "Who's Who?" of UK respiratory medicine.

It is possible to pick up this book, read a chapter in less than half an hour, and come away with an increased knowledge of the pathophysiology of the condition under study and, perhaps more usefully, the intricacies of practical management which is the focus of the book. It will therefore cater to the specialist registrar undergoing higher specialist training in providing a broad understanding in reasonable detail of most facets of respiratory medicine, but it could also be of use to the experienced physician in reaffirming, reminding, and refreshing of the basics, and perhaps updating knowledge with regard to more recent developments.

The book is attractively presented with short paragraphs of text interspersed with helpful tables and figures. For those who are stimulated to seek more information on any subject, each chapter has a selection of references for further reading. Whilst we all might aspire to read, study and inwardly digest a weighty, comprehensive tome of respiratory medicine, for most of us in busy clinical practice this proves difficult. This reviewer would therefore encourage reading and studying this excellent book as an alternative which is more attainable and possibly of more practical relevance.

**T J Warke**

Department of Respiratory Medicine, Belfast City Hospital, Belfast BT9 7AB, UK; tim@dsl.pipex.com

## NOTICE

### Scadding-Morrison Davies Joint Fellowship in Respiratory Medicine 2003

This fellowship is available to support visits to medical centres in the UK or abroad for the purpose of undertaking studies related to respiratory medicine. Applications are invited from medical graduates practising in the UK, including consultants and irrespective of the number of years in that grade. **There is no application form** but a curriculum vitae should be submitted together with a detailed account of the duration and nature of the work and the centres to be visited, confirming that these have agreed to provide the facilities required. Please state the sum of money needed for travel and subsistence. A sum of up to £20 000 can be awarded to the successful candidate, or the sum may be divided to support two or more applications. Applications should be sent to Dr I A Campbell, Secretary to the Scadding-Morrison Davies Fellowship, Llandough Hospital, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan CF64 2XX, UK by **31 January 2003**.